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Curriculum That Reaches and Represents All Learners



This issue reflects on the ways in which our thinking about curriculum design is developing. How does a teacher, department, or school rethink curriculum to reach and represent all learners and the world(s) in which they live? What challenges and opportunities do these changes offer to curriculum designers? What resources are needed to support this shift? What are some short- and long-term effects of this type of curriculum design on the student? On the teacher? On education?

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An Integrative STEM NIH Grant: Designing Equitable Curriculum to Collaborate with Undergraduate Science Majors and Spark Connections

Anne Katz, PhD, Georgia Southern University; joined NCTE in 2013

Karla-Sue C. Marriott, PhD, Savannah State University

How can curriculum be reimagined to meet the needs of students whose primary interests lie outside the ELA classroom? This discussion of STEAM and its literacy components explores one such possibility.

“ACHIEVING DIVERSITY THROUGH Integrative Scientific Research Experience” (ADISRE), a component of a five-year (2018–2023) National Institutes of Health (NIH) grant led by principal investigator Karla-Sue Marriott, has focused on developing close reading and critical thinking skills for cohorts of seven freshmen at Savannah State University (SSU), an HBCU. Marriott, who I met through a Governor’s Teaching Fellows Program, currently serves as interim chair of the Chemistry and Forensic Science Department at SSU. I work at another local university—Georgia Southern University—in the College of Education and was invited to collaborate on this NIH grant by presenting workshops at several points throughout the year to students and monitoring their progress.

ADISRE is about “Creating a Desire” for learning and the ethical application of useful scientific information. The goal of this program, funded by the **National Institute of Biomedical Imaging and Bioengineering** (NIBIB) as part of the **Enhancing Science, Technology, Engineering, and Math Educational Diversity** (ESTEEMED) initiative is to expand, leverage, and implement the program through achieving the following objectives: (a) expanding the number of high-achieving student participants; (b) increasing the emphasis on doctoral careers in the biomedical sciences through the nature of our training activities, including a holistic 6-week summer bridge program; (c) enhancing the ability of ADISRE scholars to gain entrance into competitive doctoral programs through rigorous and interactive training, negating the need for them to garner post baccalaureate experience; and (d) creating a broad, long-term institutional impact of integrative teaching and learning through the development of a new team-taught, core-area science laboratory course for freshmen and sophomores.

ADISRE seeks to spark a desire in students to become self-directed learners as well as open-minded, caring, and ethical biomedical scientists. The overarching goal is to produce STEM graduates with an internal drive to serve their community by pursuing a career in biomedical sciences. ADISRE will help to create a space for students and faculty to grow and enjoy learning and

engaging in research, while fostering environmental awareness, personal discovery, and individual development.

WHAT IS STEAM?

Understanding STEAM and How Children Use It, National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning
STEM v. STEAM: Do the Arts Belong? Edweek

literacy skills development as an outgrowth of traditional STEM curriculum.

Perspective and Theoretical Frameworks

There is a definite need on a broad scale to expose science students to **integrative learning**. There is a need for these science students to become **more resourceful and to experiment** with removing

HOW DOES STEAM EDUCATION BENEFIT LEARNING?

How STEAM Education Develops 21st Century Skills, SI News: Independent News for International Students
New Skills: 4 Benefits of STEAM Education, Teach Thought
More Than a Trend: Crucial Ways in Which STEAM Shapes Student Thinking, SHARE

STEAM LEARNING AND INQUIRY

PBL and STEAM Education: A Natural Fit, Edutopia
The Art of Inquiry in STEAM Education, Resilient Educator

ADISRE incorporates STEAM (science, technology, engineering, art, and math) **curriculum, which integrates art and design-related strategies in conjunction with content-area**

unnecessary thought-limiting boundaries, thereby learning how to make connections across multiple disciplines.

Cervetti and Hiebert (2019) explain that research has demonstrated that different kinds of knowledge have a positive impact on comprehension, from “knowledge of the topic of the text . . . to knowledge of the broader domain . . . to cultural knowledge and general world knowledge” (p. 499).

ADISRE is designed to improve students' depth of understanding as well as their ability to communicate across

WHERE DO THE HUMANITIES AND BIOMEDICAL STUDIES INTERSECT?

▶ **What Is Medical Humanities and Why?** *Lit Med Magazine*

Biomedical Ethics and Medical Humanities, *Stanford Medicine*

Defining the Humanities: Medical Humanities, *Stanford*

disciplines, troubleshoot and solve complex problems, and think creatively. We believe that the successful implementation of ADISRE will provide learning experiences for our STEAM students that will assist them in developing the

critical tools, skills, and knowledge necessary to graduate with confidence, which will enable them to create their own unique space in the world with benefits to society. Thus, we expect that the successful implementation of this program will result in increased student retention as competitive undergraduates in their rising junior year transition into our new institutional honors program followed by a graduate degree program and **a career in biomedical sciences.**

The ADISRE Summer Bridge program ensures that our scholars develop a connection with the campus and community by implementing a holistic approach involving faculty and professional academic advisors. It involves workshops that nurture integrative

WHY SET A PURPOSE IN READING?

▶ **Reading with Purpose in the Content Areas,** *ReadWriteThink*

through teamwork, as well as service to the community through scientific contributions. Scholars who participate in the Summer Bridge program emerge empowered, having developed critical knowledge, ensuring their academic retention and success.

Close reading of science-based articles from a range of sources (such as PBS NewsHour, NPR, CBS News, and poetry; see Figure 1) encourage **setting a purpose for student reading tasks.**

In addition, articles from these **sources that cultivate a sense of personal and cultural heritage are included in these close reading exercises.**

The process helps students concentrate on what is being

CONNECTING NONFICTION TEXTS AND READERS

▶ **Nonfiction Comprehension: Making and Applying Personal and Textual Connections,** *Scholastic*
Taking Action on Adolescent Literacy, *ASCD*

learning, effective study skills, depth of understanding through reading strategies, creativity, and innovation

read, encourages sustained effort to fully understand the text, develops critical reading and thinking skills, and enables learners to become strategic and independent readers. Close reading

encourages the development of skills and strategies, such as the ability to interpret words and phrases, analyze structural—visual and textual elements, understand the author's reasoning and use of evidence, ask text-based questions, promote connections, and integrate ideas and knowledge from the text (Lehman & Roberts, 2013).

ADISRE scholars will greatly benefit from these workshops, as reading is crucial to understanding and having the ability to write clearly for meaningful communication. Too often, reading is neglected and preference is

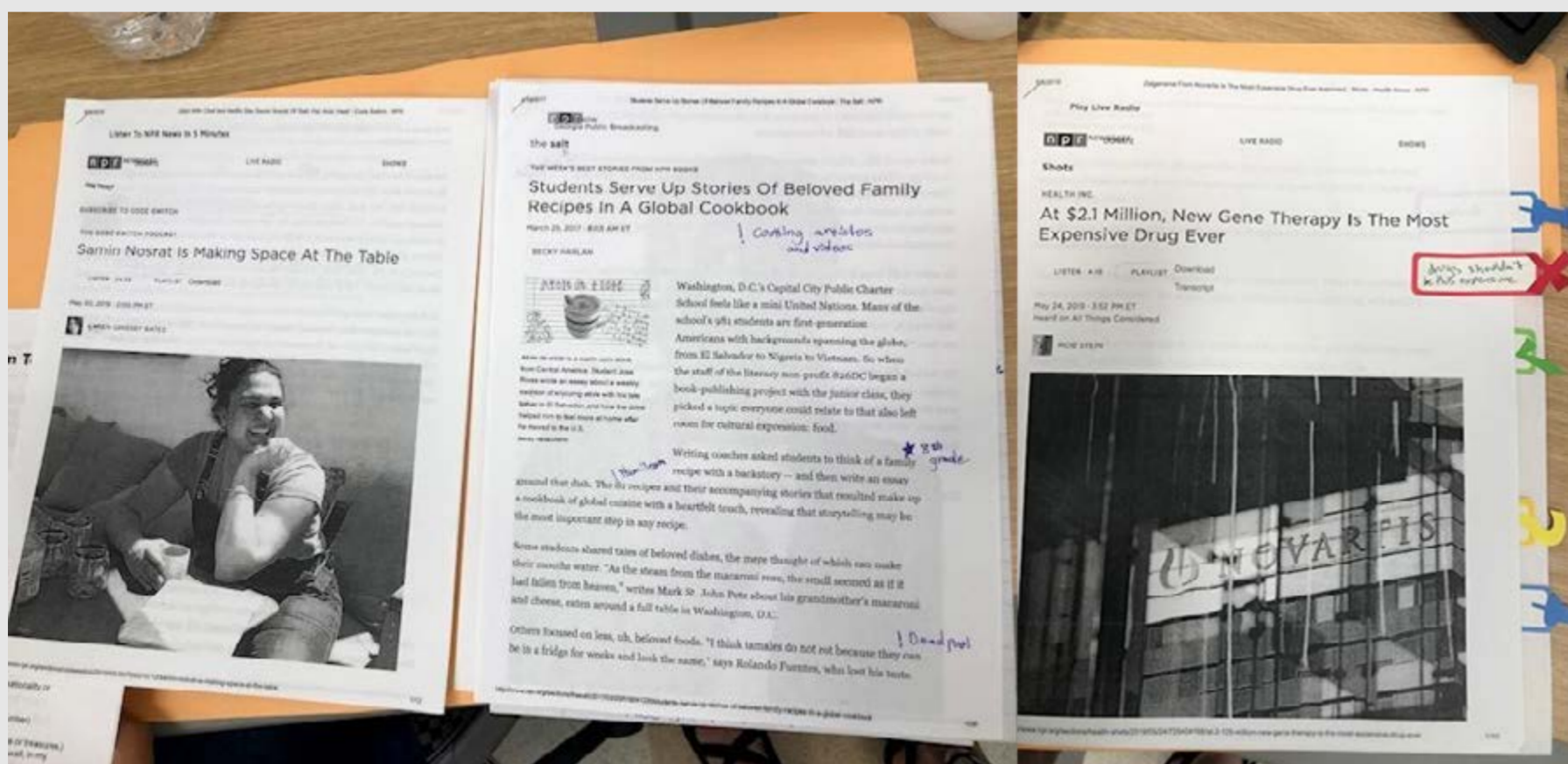


FIGURE 1. CLOSE READING STUDENT WORK SAMPLES AROUND TWO NPR ARTICLES

TEXT SETS AND STEAM EDUCATION

Creating Text Sets for Your Classroom, *Campbell University*

Text sets: Building blocks of background knowledge, *Fordham Institute*

explain that student agency—“the ability of individual students to influence and to create opportunities in the learning context through intentions, decisions, and actions”—merits consideration (Vaughn, 2018, p. 62). How do students develop the characteristics needed to persist and engage in the learning process? Vaughn, Premo, Sotirovska, and Erickson (2020) encourage educators to consider how students interact with a text “to exert influence and open up new learning opportunities” (p. 428).

Close reading requires prompting students to “unpack” the text to promote deeper comprehension. Regular practice with **complex texts and a range of text types** (including narrative, informational, and poetry) facilitates students’ ability to succeed with college-level text as well as text that they encounter in their everyday lives (see Figure 2). Close reading enables students to become critical readers

given to working on academic writing skills. We believe both are equally important and worthy of similar attention. Vaughn, Premo, Sotirovska, and Erickson (2020)

as they build their knowledge through evidence gathered from narrative, informational, and other text types.

Methods, Technique, and Mode of Inquiry

In this study, learners further developed their close reading skills by working with multiple types of complex texts. Students were invited to participate in multiple close reading demonstrations and writing applications throughout the course of each workshop. For their first reading of the material, students were asked to preview the article in order to figure out what the text said. During the second reading, they were invited to consider how the text worked. This was followed by the “**Knew-New-Q**” (K-N-Q) activity (Gambrell, 2014), in which students annotated the text. Afterwards, students shared their reflections with a peer and wrote a sentence to solidify their “Knew-New-Q” insights. Additional close reading strategies were introduced and reinforced throughout the workshops. This included a “what do you notice?” chart to record ideas and spark discussion as well as additional annotation strategies that can be utilized while reading. Strategies such as rewriting the text as a series of tweets or text messages, discussion circles, analyzing a text from different viewpoints, and creating student-generated discussion questions to accompany a text were also introduced. Students were invited to employ a range of close reading and critical literacy strategies throughout discussions. These strategies included using Avery

colored dots, incorporating the K-N-Q activity, making connections, creating visual outlines, and implementing annotation strategies, among others (see Figures 3 and 4).

Data Sources and Results

For each cohort, data was collected from pre- and post-session surveys on students’ reading memories and concepts of themselves as readers that were distributed at the beginning of each session (see Tables 1 and 2). In addition to results from the surveys, an audit trail was kept to document student learning. This included tracking workshop activities and student applications of the strategies in notebooks. Finally, a post-workshop survey was sent to students at 2-month intervals between workshops to document their progress as close readers with feedback sent to encourage continued growth (see Table 3).

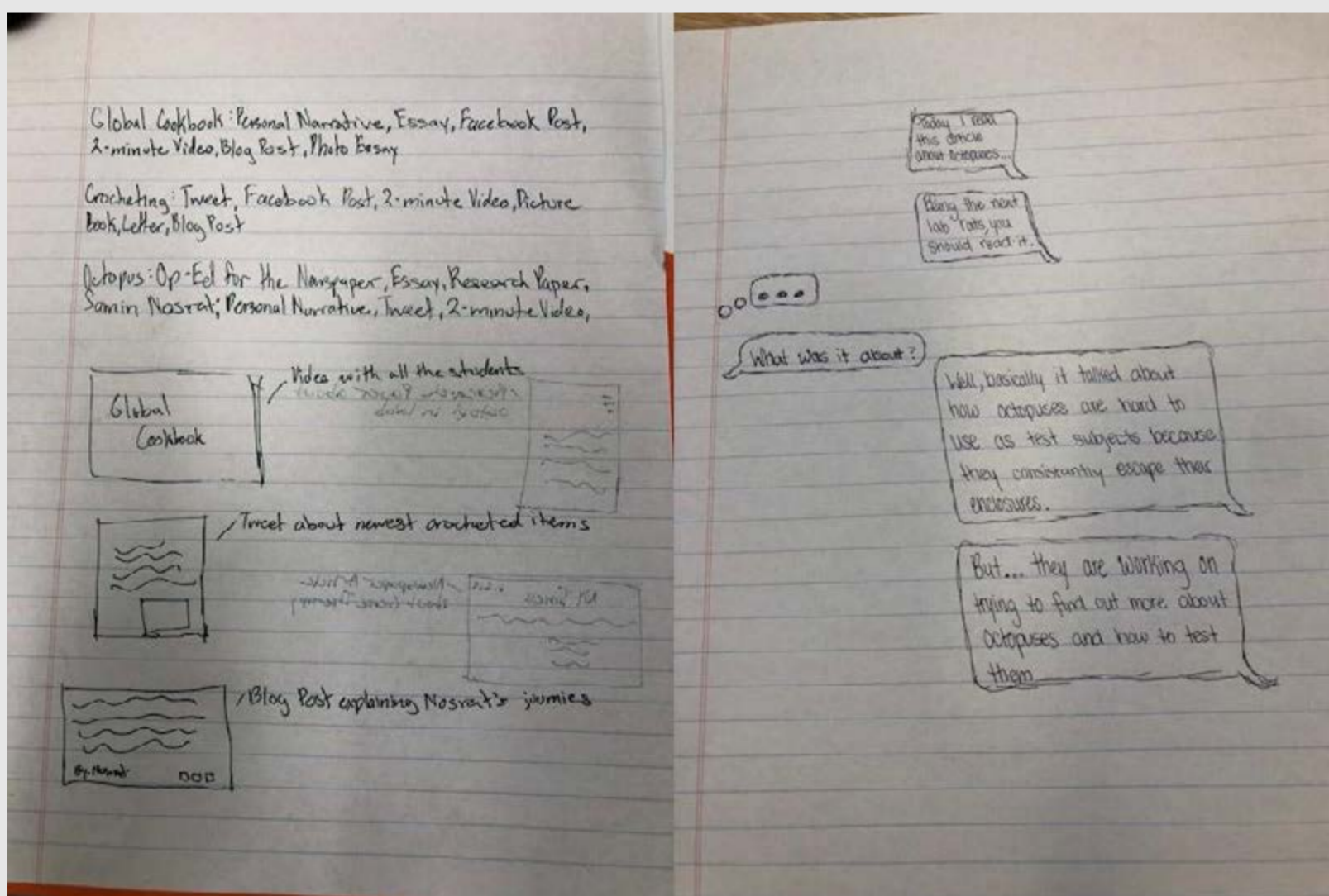


FIGURE 2. STUDENT SAMPLE OF REWRITING ARTICLES IN VARIOUS FORMATS (VIDEO, TWEET, BLOG, TEXT).

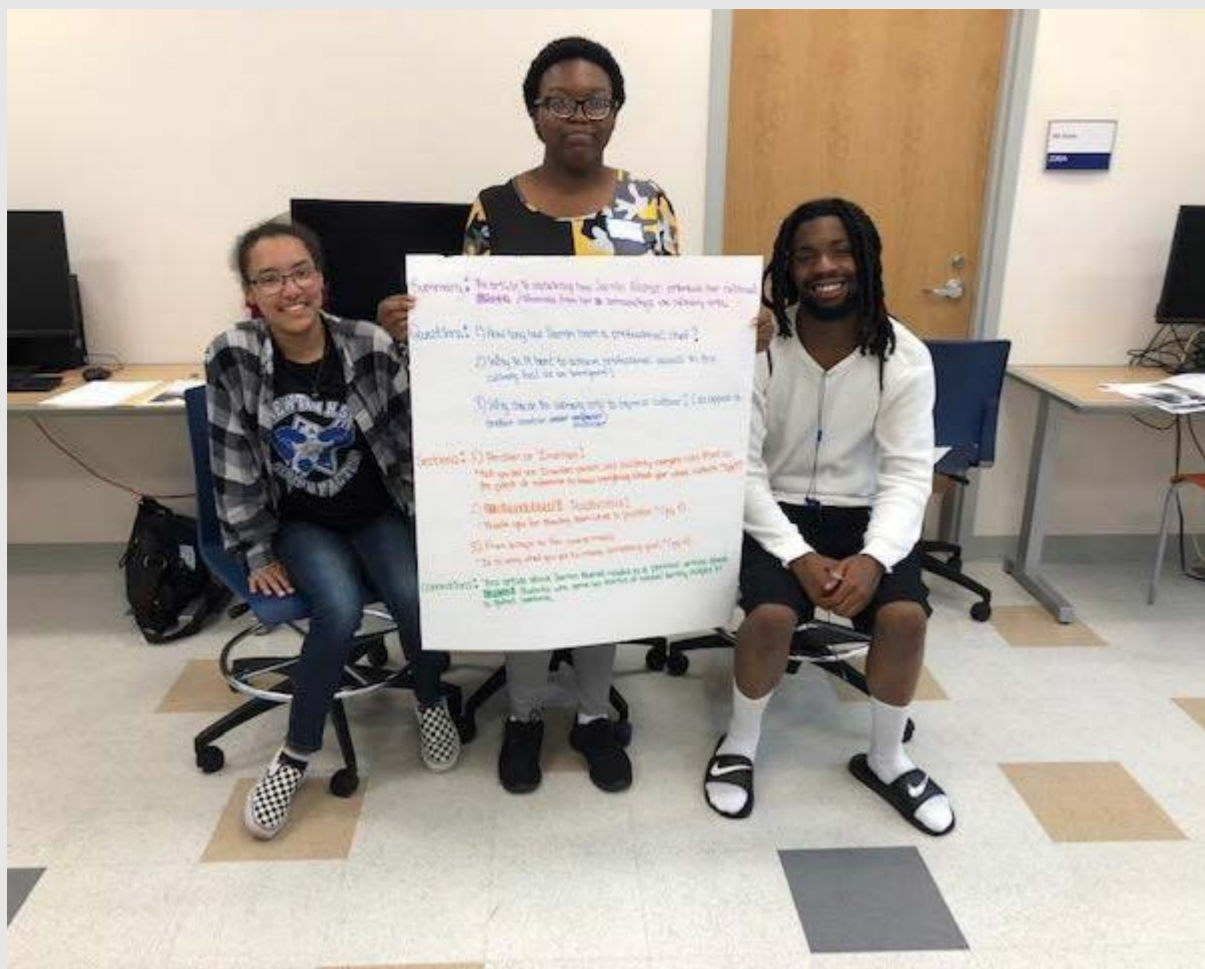


FIGURE 3. STUDENTS IN A SMALL GROUP SHARE THEIR QUESTIONS AND DISCUSSION STRATEGIES AROUND AN ARTICLE WITH THEIR COLLEAGUES.

TABLE 1. READING MEMORIES

Student	Earliest memory of being read to from early childhood	Kinds of books/reading materials read to you	Feelings associated with experience	Key people who influenced your reading opinions	Where/how you acquired books/reading materials?
A (Freshman male)	Mom reading at night, Kindergarten	Dinosaur book—how they lived/ate/died; made me curious	Curiosity; that there was more to know	Mom; same taste in books and same taste in genres	Mom, library, friends, bookstore, Walmart, school, Target
B (Freshman female)	Preschool—learning the alphabet; road signs while driving to Georgia from New York	Food advertisements/brands; Dr. Seuss books	Excitement; eagerness; hunger (toward food ads)	My grandfather made reading important. My mother made reading entertaining.	The local public library or from family
C (Freshman female)	Mom reading “Little Bill” books to me	Dr. Seuss, Little Bill, Clifford, Dora, educational books, menus from restaurants	Before high school, I loved to read. Now, I don’t like to read as much.	My teachers, who often give a lot of books to read within a certain period of time	The library, Barnes and Noble, teachers from elementary to high school, mother, friends
D (Freshman male)	Phonics booklets for homework in preschool; bedtime stories read by mom	“When You Give a Mouse a Cookie...” series	Love	My mom and K–3/K–4 teacher Mrs. Duncan drove me to read more because they loved hearing me read.	School, or mom always bought books for me if I wanted to read them

TABLE 2. SELF-CONCEPT AS A READER

Student	Kinds of books you like to read both in school and at home	Kinds of reading you do in what different formats	How do you find out about books/ reading materials/online resources you like to read?	What are some of your immediate reading goals both in school and at home?	What could professors do to make reading for school more enjoyable?
A (Freshman male)	Crime, horror, humor, human trafficking	iPhone, laptop, Twitter, e-mail, chat	Social media (Twitter) and Instagram	I want to be more confident reading in front of people. I want to start reading more.	Give some sort of incentive.
B (Freshman female)	Horror novels/ thriller stories that make you want to keep reading; also science fiction and dramatic novels	Wattpad stories; Instagram and Snapchat posts	Other people make recommendation; suggestions based on what I’ve previously read	Always to comprehend on a higher level; be entertained and drawn into the story	Make reading relatable to some of the current youth or make them detailed and interesting [so we can] picture it in our head like a movie
C (Freshman female)	Fiction, African American and Latin writers, female writers, writers from other countries	Twitter, schoolwork, daily news, Google searches, Twitter, e-mail, text messages, Instagram, Snapchats	My mom or my teachers	Get back to loving to read again; read more self-help books	Don’t rush reading. It takes time to appreciate and enjoy a book.
D (Freshman male)	Classical novels, works of literary merit, poetry, science fiction, fantasy, mystery	My friends and I will sometimes share poetry we write online or with each other.	Through friends or past books or authors that I like who are publishing a new series	Have a better understanding of modern English	I already enjoy reading a lot.

A sample of results from the first two cohorts of student participants are illustrated in Tables 1, 2, and 3. By providing university students who are in the early stages of their degree programs with this curricular experience, these workshops appear to be accomplishing the strategic goals of providing transformative student learning experiences and increasing retention. According to the Association of American Colleges and Universities text *General Education Transformed: How We Can, How We Must* (2015), “Too many students experience general education not as a conspicuously useful and meaningful component of a coherent baccalaureate education, but as a curricular impediment that they must ‘get out of the way’ prior to study in a major . . . [and] they may be unable to visualize a meaningful trajectory in their curriculum, with an attendant loss of motivation and commitment to persist” (p. 5). To combat this, ADISRE connects STEAM with content-area literacy skill development, inspiring creativity and promoting collaboration across the disciplines.

Student	What specific "close reading" strategies from the workshop have you applied in your own reading?	What kind of reading material have you used to apply the strategy/strategies?	Have you applied any of the note-taking strategies presented from the workshop in your own reading? If so, which ones?	What kind of reading material have you used to apply the strategy/strategies?	Did the close reading strategies workshop make you a more effective and strategic reader/increase your comprehension?
A (Freshman male)	Colored dots; text-to-text/text-to-self connections; memorable word choice	Science text	3-2-1 discussion strategy; outline with your own connections; create own discussion questions	Science text	Very helpful and effective. I learned new ways to read and annotate text. It was interesting getting to use the different methods throughout the workshop.
B (Freshman female)	Author's perspective; K-N-Q strategy	English literature; history class	Taking notes as tweets; Post-it Note diagram	English literature; history class	It gave me tools and strategies that I wish I had known earlier.
C (Freshman female)	Annotation coding strategy; discussion circles in a study group	Science text; news articles for current events	Outline with your own connections; create own discussion questions	Science text; news articles for current events	Showed me how to have a literary roadmap to understanding a text. There are many strategies and finding one that best suits your learning style can help expand your understanding of a work.
D (Freshman male)	Author's perspective; K-N-Q strategy	Science text; science lab	Post-it Note diagram; sketches of key points with captions; 3-2-1 discussion strategy	Science text; science lab	I have used many of these methods since I took the workshop. It made studying so much easier by letting me focus on key notes on everything I read. I have also increased my test grades.

TABLE 3. POST-WORKSHOP SURVEY

Acknowledgments

This work is supported by funding from the National Institutes of Health-NIH-NIBIB-ESTEEMED (5R25EB025768-02). The authors would like to express appreciation to the Department of Chemistry and Forensic Science, Savannah State University, Savannah, GA.

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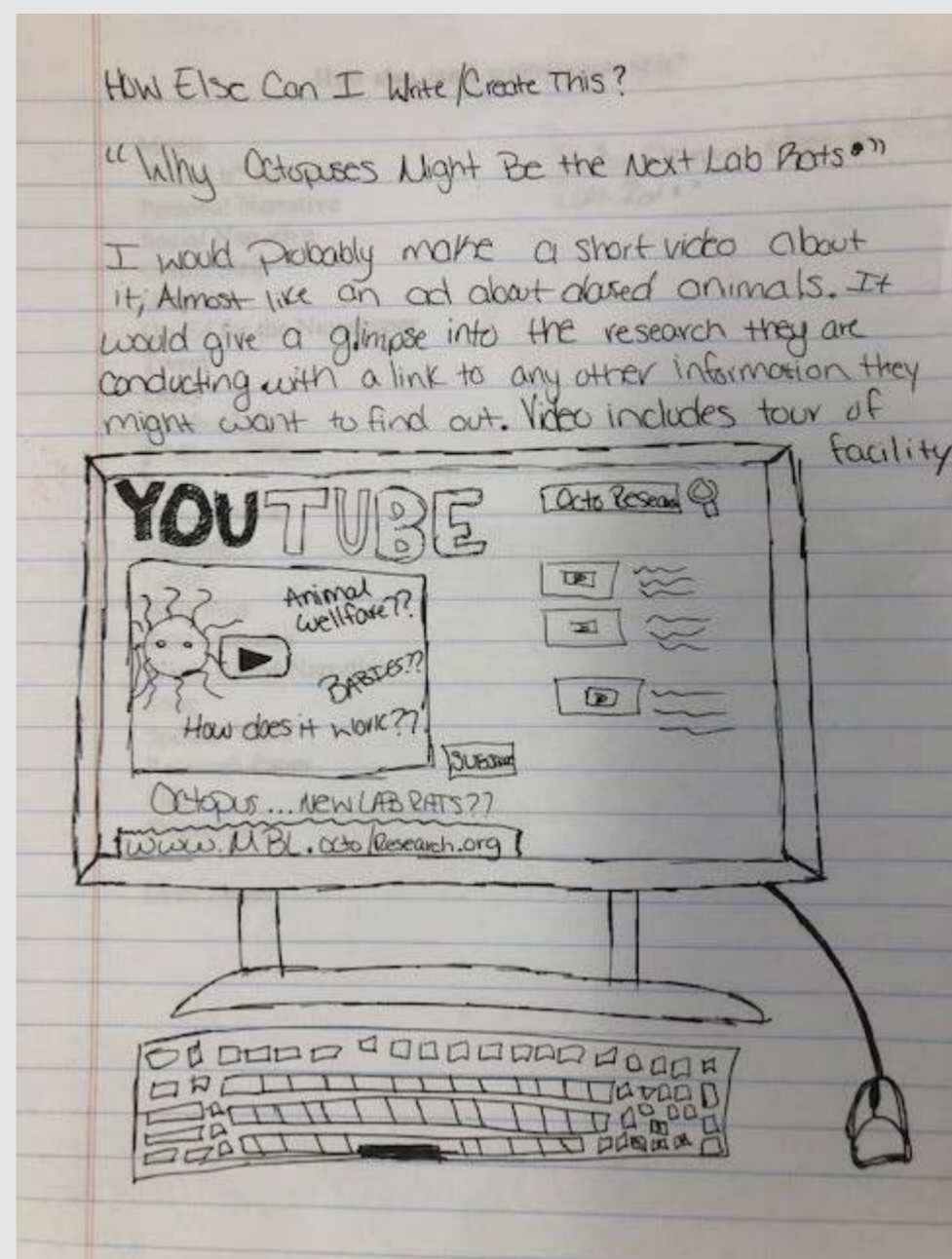


FIGURE 4. STUDENT WORKSHOP ACTIVITY FROM NOTEBOOK—"HOW ELSE CAN I WRITE/CREATE THIS?"—IN RESPONSE TO A PBS NEWSHOUR SCIENCE ARTICLE.

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Shining Light in Dark Corners: Choosing Heavy Books for the Classroom

Jessica Gallo, University of Nevada, Reno; joined NCTE in 2008, CEL in 2014  @JessRGallo

Bailey Herrmann, University of Wisconsin Oshkosh; joined NCTE in 2011, CEL in 2013

Today's students are struggling with stress and trauma every day. How can curriculum be a force in supporting these learners?

MANY STUDENTS IN OUR classrooms are dealing with considerable stress in their lives outside of school. Nearly half of youth in the United States have experienced one or more adverse childhood events, or ACEs, and one in ten youth have experienced three or more ACEs (Sacks & Murphey, 2018). ACEs are “potentially traumatic experiences and events, ranging from abuse and neglect to living with an adult with a mental illness.

HOW DO ACES AFFECT THE CLASSROOM?

▶ **Education Brief: ACEs for Educators and Stakeholders, *The Illinois ACEs Response Collaborative***

Addressing Adverse Childhood Experiences in School, Supporting Mental Health in Schools, ASCD

ACEs and Resilience: What Can We Do? *Public Schools First NC*

They can have negative, **lasting effects** on health and well-being in childhood or later in life” (Sacks & Murphey, 2018, para. 1). Often, we don't know about the stressful situations our students are dealing with, nor are we equipped to

provide the kinds of interventions that counselors or social workers provide. However, as English leaders, we believe that the books we choose to offer in our classrooms can provide powerful support for students, allowing them to see themselves in literature, examine difficult situations through a new lens, and engage in conversations with peers about life's challenges.

Many English teachers have made progress in choosing books and curriculum materials that more accurately reflect the racial and gender demographics of our schools. We have begun to think more carefully about representation of demographic diversity in our curriculum and have worked to broaden our literature selections. Bishop (1992) has written about the value of books in helping students see themselves and others in literature. When we choose books that act as windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors for our students (Bishop, 1990), we provide them with opportunities to

think about their lives through the lens of a character in a book. This act of providing opportunities for students to see their own realities and others' realities benefits all students. As Bishop (1990) says, “Children from dominant social groups have always found their

mirrors in books, but they, too, have suffered from the lack of availability of books about others. They need books as windows into reality, not just on imaginary worlds” (para. 5). Yet the progress we have made with racial and gender representation hasn't always extended to books that represent adverse childhood experiences.

As we learn more about ACEs, and in the spirit of continuing our work to use books as mirrors, windows,

TRAUMA-INFORMED CLASSROOMS

▶ **Trauma-Informed Curriculum Helps Prepare Teachers to Support Troubled Students, *Insight into Diversity***

Trauma-Informed Teaching Strategies, ASCD

WHERE CAN YOU FIND BOOKS ABOUT ACES?

▶ **Book Lists, *American Library Association***

The Classroom Bookshelf, *School Library Journal*

Books for Middle and High School Age, *Cooperative Children's Book Center*

and sliding glass doors, it might be a good time to ask ourselves whether we are choosing curriculum that reflects the **lived experiences of our students**, including difficult or challenging life experiences.

Books that focus on events or situations that depict ACEs, such as drug use, physical and emotional abuse, suicide, or mental health problems, can feel especially heavy when we discuss them with students because we, as teachers, feel uncertain about how to talk about these difficult topics sensitively and accurately. Adolescents often are drawn to books about these heavy topics “that make many adults uncomfortable” (Ivey & Johnston, 2018, p. 143). These books are engaging for many of our students,

sometimes because their lives have been impacted by these issues and sometimes because they are curious about what it would be like to face such difficult circumstances (Ivey & Johnston, 2018). Allowing students space to think about difficult topics through literature is another way of providing windows, mirrors, and sliding glass doors.

It is understandable that some teachers, at first, may be hesitant to teach these books and provide them in their classrooms. Some teachers express concern about exposing their students to topics like violence, sexual assault, and drug use. For example,

ADDITIONAL BOOKS ABOUT ADDICTION

▶ **8 YA Reads to Spark Authentic Discussions about Drugs and Alcohol, *We Are Teachers***

Books for Kids and Teens about Alcohol and Drug Abuse, *Common Sense Media*

Kate Messner's middle-grade book *The Seventh Wish* explores the experiences of a girl whose college-age sister is addicted to heroin. Soon after the book's publication, Messner's long-planned visit to a school was canceled with very short notice. In this case, some of the administrators and librarians felt that the students weren't equipped to handle the controversial topic of drug abuse (Messner, 2016).

However, Messner wrote the book to address a very real problem in families today and to spark **conversations about addiction**. Given the current opioid crisis in the United States, it seems likely that this is a situation that has touched the lives of some of our students. Reading a book about a family member's addiction, written from the point of view of a middle school girl, can provide teachers and students with an opportunity to talk about drugs in an empathetic and constructive way. Students who may feel alone and ashamed of their family's experiences with drug addiction might find solace in seeing their story represented in a novel, while students who have not experienced addiction might be better prepared to understand peers who have. This was Messner's hope in writing the book. She says:

I understand that school administrators are afraid to talk about tough issues sometimes. Authors are, too. But we're not protecting kids when we keep them from stories that shine a light in the darker corners of their lives. We're just leaving them alone in the dark. (Messner, 2016, para. 13)

We can't let our own fear of talking about these stories prevent us from sharing them with students who might need to hear them.

Sometimes the books that tackle difficult topics shed light on situations that are **considered taboo or are rarely discussed**

ADDITIONAL BOOKS ABOUT MENTAL HEALTH

▶ **12 Kid-Approved Middle Grade Books That Tackle Mental Health, *Brightly***

50 Must-Read YA Books about Mental Illness (Plus a Few More), *Book Riot*

in other parts of teenagers' lives. For students who are struggling with these issues, books like these could help them feel less alone. For example, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* has been challenged in schools and libraries all over the country for its depictions of depression, suicide, and sexual assault. In the book, Hannah leaves an audio diary of the 13 reasons she died by suicide, including the bullying and sexual harassment she experienced in school. The book is a testament to the negative impacts of peer violence. Told from the perspective of a teenage boy who has lost his crush to suicide, *Thirteen Reasons Why* depicts the grief and confusion that he feels and his struggle to understand why and how this could have happened to Hannah. Since its publication, the book has been made into a television series that has caused concern over its graphic depictions of the book's content. In spite of all the controversy surrounding both the book and the TV series, *Thirteen Reasons Why* remains a popular choice for young adults because "adolescents, like all readers, become engaged with books they find personally relevant" (Ivey & Johnston, 2018, p. 143). Suicide is the second leading cause of death for adolescents ages 15–19 (Heron, 2019), so it is possible that many of our students are thinking about the impact that suicide has had on their own lives. Like Messner, Asher wrote his book to shed light on a topic that hasn't been discussed openly. He says that after a teenage relative attempted suicide, he felt he had to write this story so that other teenagers don't feel as alone as his relative did. He says,

in other parts of teenagers' lives. For students who are struggling with these issues, books like these could help them feel less alone. For example, Jay Asher's *Thirteen Reasons Why* has



“So it made me feel like, yeah, you’re writing about very sensitive issues, but that’s why we need to talk about it: because it’s hard to” (Hamblin, 2017, para. 6). When we avoid books that deal with difficult situations, we might assume that we are protecting our students from reading about scary topics that they are not yet ready to face. However, we may be missing the fact that some of our students have already experienced situations like these, and a book that provides a mirror for these students might offer them an opportunity to feel seen.

In our conversations with other English teachers about the idea of teaching books with heavy content, we have often turned to the essay “Why We Shouldn’t Shield Children from Darkness” by children’s and young adult book author Matt de la Peña (2018). In it, he describes how during the publishing process for his book *Love*, he was encouraged not to include an illustration of “a despondent young boy [who] hides beneath a piano with his dog, while his parents argue across the living room” (de la Peña, 2018, para. 9). Some people involved in the publication process believed that this illustration, which included an empty old-fashioned glass sitting

on top of the piano, was too heavy for children. De la Peña and the book’s illustrator, Loren Long, fought to keep the illustration.

In the book world, we often talk about the power of racial inclusion—and in this respect we’re beginning

INDEPENDENT AND CHOICE READING IN THE CLASSROOM

NCTE’s Statement on Independent Reading

5 Teaching Strategies to Facilitate Independent Reading, *TeachHub*

Literature Circles: Getting Started, *ReadWriteThink*

to see a real shift in the field—but many other facets of diversity remain in the shadows. For instance, an uncomfortable number of children out there right now are crouched beneath a metaphorical piano. There’s a power to seeing this largely unspoken part of our interior lives represented, too. And for those who’ve yet to experience that kind of sadness, I can’t think of a safer place to explore complex emotions for the first time than inside the pages of a book, while sitting in the lap of a loved one. (de la Peña, 2018, para. 14)

When we have shared this article with teachers, many of them have had visceral responses. They remember times when they had felt that their own challenges from childhood were not represented in books and how comforting it would have been to have a book that showed their real lives. The beauty of de la Peña’s article encourages these teachers to rethink their positions about using heavy books in their classrooms so that they are able to provide that comfort to their students.

Being willing to include heavy books in our curriculum means being willing to employ other good reading practices too. **Rather than thinking of these books only as potential whole-class novels, offer books that include depictions of difficult situations as independent choices or book club books.** Sharing short daily book talks with your students can pique their interest in the variety of books you offer in your classroom (Miller, 2009). When you book talk a heavy book, think about how you will represent any potentially difficult content in it; your book talk should guide students to use their own discretion in choosing books that are right for them. Students should be allowed and encouraged to abandon books that are not a good fit for them (Kittle, 2013). In thinking about our approaches to including heavy books in our curriculum, consider these guidelines and talk with your team about how to incorporate them in your teaching:

- Be brave in your willingness to allow students to read about situations that are challenging for us as teachers.
- Be willing to trust students’ ability to choose a book that is relevant and valuable, even if it makes us uncomfortable.
- Be ready to talk about these topics when students bring them up in the context of sharing their reading.
- Be sensitive and thoughtful in how you represent the content of books that you include in your curriculum and classroom.
- Be honest with your students about the potential challenges of reading books that depict difficult situations.

As English leaders, it is important to engage in conversations with one another about how to include books that have challenging topics in our classrooms and curriculum. We can support one another as teachers by thinking together about how to address heavy topics in books with our students. We can share approaches that will help us sensitively and thoughtfully support students in reading the books that represent their lives, no matter how challenging or difficult those lives are. When we have conversations about how to approach potentially sensitive content in books with students, we need to recognize our own discomfort that comes with reading those books as well as consider the benefits that can come from teaching them. As teachers, we want to choose books and curriculum that are in the best interests of our students. Just as we have worked to more accurately represent the racial and gender characteristics of our students in the books we choose, so too must we consider how to represent the challenging, difficult, complicated lives of our students in ways that help them see themselves in the books they read.

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Call for Submissions: 2020 NCTE/Penguin Random House Teacher Awards

These two awards recognize the nation's most dynamic and resourceful teachers who use their creativity to inspire and successfully instill a lifelong love of reading and poetry in students. The **Lifelong Readers** and **Maya Angelou Teacher Award for Poetry** each grant \$10,000 to the winning educators' schools. Both are open to full-time and part-time teachers in grades K–12 to self-nominate or nominate another.

Submission information can be found on the NCTE website at <https://ncte.org/awards/educator-awards/ncte-prh-teacher-awards/>; the deadline is **May 31, 2020**. Winners will be notified by September 1, 2020, and the award will be presented at the NCTE Awards Session during the 2020 NCTE Annual Convention in Denver, Colorado.

Call for Applications: 2020 NCTE Early Career Educator of Color Leadership Award

This award supports early career teachers of color as they build accomplished teaching careers in literacy education. It is open to practicing preK to university-level literacy educators of color who are in the first five years of a

paid teaching career and who aspire to build a career in literacy education. You must be or become an NCTE member to receive this award.

Submission information can be found on the NCTE website at <https://ncte.org/awards/ncte-early-career-educator-teacher-of-color-leadership-award/>; the deadline is **April 15, 2020**.

Call for Nominations: 2020 NCTE Leadership Awards

The **NCTE Advancement of People of Color Leadership Award** (APCL) is a special award given to an NCTE member of color who has made a significant contribution to NCTE and the development of our professional community.

The **NCTE Leadership Award for People with Disabilities** recognizes a person with a disability who has made a significant contribution to NCTE and to the development of our professional community.

The **NCTE LGBTQ+ Advocacy & Leadership Award** recognizes a member of the LGBTQ+ community who has made a significant contribution to NCTE and to the development of our professional community.

Submission information can be found on the NCTE leadership awards webpage at <https://ncte.org/awards/service-awards/>. All award submissions are due **May 15, 2020**.

Confronting Concerns, Navigating Politics: Teaching Young Adult Literature in High School English Departments

Henry “Cody” Miller, *SUNY Brockport*; joined NCTE in 2018, member of CEL

Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko, *SUNY Brockport*; joined NCTE in 2019

Shelby Boehm, *University of Florida*; joined NCTE in 2016

What instructional resources effectively support curriculum that reaches and represents all learners? Young adult literature can be incorporated into any classroom to engage all students in rigorous critical thinking.

THE BENEFITS OF folding young adult (YA) literature into secondary English language arts (ELA) curriculum have been widely

YA LITERATURE AND CRITICAL THINKING

Reading for a Better World: Teaching for Social Responsibility with Young Adult Literature, S. Wolk, *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, May 2009

Young Adult Literature in the College Classroom: A Reminder of Why We Love Literature, ALAN

Young Adult Literature in Today’s Classroom (entire issue) in ELQ, April 2009

as a bridge between students’ lived experiences and the school’s curriculum (Flores et al., 2016).

Additionally, YA literature has been seen as a vehicle for helping students become more critical and justice-oriented citizens

by supporting students’ understanding of critical theory (Jones, 2015; Latrobe & Drury, 2009; Webb, 2012, 2015), promoting perspective-taking capacities (Thein et al., 2007), addressing issues of social power and identity (Beach et al., 2015; Garcia, 2013; Ginsberg & Glenn, 2019; Linville & Carlson, 2015), and supporting the cultivation of global perspectives (Durand, 2012; Holmes, 2019). In short, YA literature can be seen as satisfying the increasingly steep demands of

documented. YA literature has been argued as a resolution for perennial problems faced by classroom teachers, such as providing quality differentiated instruction (Groenke & Scherff, 2010), supporting the development of foundational reading skills (Gibbons et al., 2006), and acting



YA literature can be seen as satisfying the increasingly steep demands of state education departments while still supporting the aims of a quality, critical ELA curriculum.

state education departments while still supporting the aims of a quality, critical ELA curriculum.

Despite the various benefits of incorporating YA literature into secondary ELA curriculum, there remains significant hesitation about using YA literature in the classroom from teachers. Some hesitation comes from incorporating multicultural YA literature. The definition of “multicultural” has expanded in recent years to encompass not just ethnic and racial minorities, but also religious and sexual minorities along with people living outside of the United States and people with disabilities (Temple et al., 2014). Concerns about using multicultural YA literature range from self-identified “pro-LGBTQ+” teachers afraid to use LGBTQ+ YA literature in classroom (Thein et al., 2013) to teachers worried they don’t know enough about other cultures to use multicultural YA literature (Kuo & Alsup, 2010). Other hesitations about the use of YA literature include the belief that YA literature will not align with mandated state standards (Kuo & Alsup, 2010) and a fear that YA literature does not meet “literary merit” for rigorous courses like Advanced Placement (AP) Literature (Miller, 2013; Miller & Slifkin, 2010).

These concerns are very real, and in a time when tenure for practitioners is being eviscerated in state legislatures and standardized testing composes a bulk of a teacher’s annual evaluation (Boldt & Ayers, 2012; Kumashiro, 2008, 2012), these concerns cannot be dismissed. Hartman’s (2016) study of secondary English teachers found that teachers are able to “comply with the mandates set forth” by educational governing bodies while simultaneously resisting “those parts that interfere” with their beliefs as educators (p. 19). In this article, we will address how we

implemented YA literature across our school’s department in a manner that attended to the aforementioned concerns. In doing so, we illuminate how teachers can satisfy state standards while implementing effective YA literature instruction.

Our Positionalities and Contexts

We all taught at a K–12 public school affiliated with the local college of education. Per the

bylaws of the school, our student demographic reflected the racial, economic, and ability diversity of the state. Our school set limits at 125 students per grade level and each secondary content area was allotted one teacher per grade level. Additionally, the school had detracked their honors courses for middle and high school, resulting in all students enrolling in English I Honors and English II Honors during their ninth and tenth grade years. The state standardized the tests that served as a graduation requirement.

Cody Miller taught ninth grade English from 2013–2019. Kathleen Colantonio-Yurko taught tenth grade English from 2011–2016. Shelby Boehm taught tenth grade English from 2016–2019. Cody identifies as a white cisgender queer able-bodied man. Kathleen and Shelby identify as white cisgender straight able-bodied women. Our own dominant social identities as white, cisgender, able-bodied teachers provided privilege that aided our navigation of the departmental and administrative politics.

Similar to the research outlined earlier, our zeal for making YA literature a prominent part of the English experience was met with some trepidation from fellow teachers, community members, and administrators. All students were enrolled in honors courses during ninth and tenth grade, but students could opt to take AP English in eleventh and twelfth grade. Questions like, “How does YA literature prepare students for AP?” and “What about the standardized tests?” were frequent. Additionally, teachers worried how to develop the knowledge to teach narratives outside of their own dominant identities. Finally, content material in many YA literature titles was considered controversial by some educators and faced pushback. These concerns are very real within both our own contexts and the broader scholarship. To heed these concerns, we spend the following section outlining how we explicitly addressed them in order to make YA literature an integral part of our secondary ELA department.

Amending Former AP prompts to Address Concerns about “Rigor”

When we increased our use of YA literature across ninth and tenth grade levels, a constellation of stakeholders, including parents, administrators, and other English teachers, expressed concern about the rigor and **complexity** of the texts.

These stakeholders often questioned YA literature potential for preparing students for AP Literature, which was a course offered the senior year of high school. Jennifer Buehler (2016) reminds us that arguments about text complexity are always “ideologically loaded” and too often, calls for text complexity are actually “code for keeping classic literature at the center of the curriculum” (p.

HOW IS TEXT COMPLEXITY MEASURED?

▶ **Measuring Text Complexity: Three Factors, CCSS Initiative**

Close Look at Close Reading: Teaching Students to Analyze Complex Texts, Grades K–5, ASCD

The Complex Matter of Text Complexity, Harvard Education Letter

AP book list in book clubs as well as YA literature. Additionally, we provided options for students to engage with AP-based prompts using YA literature texts. In using AP prompts as our aegis against the criticism that YA literature isn’t “rigorous,” we were working “within the system to meet the mandate, but doing so on our own terms” (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015, p. 9). We have a multitude of

COLLEGE BOARD RESOURCES

▶ **AP English Language & Composition Free-Response Questions**

AP English Language & Composition Free-Response Questions

Literature prompts are available for free on the **College Board’s website**. We found that selecting some prompts and amending the language to meet our students’ needs was an effective way to provide both choice and rigor for our students. AP Literature was not offered until students’ senior year at our school, which could not be dismissed when amending the language of the AP prompts. We do not suggest selecting just any prompt. Instead, we looked for prompts that focused on issues and topics we believed fit our curricular goals. For instance, we typically avoided prompts that were rooted in New Criticism. Instead, we selected prompts that touched on themes of culture, identity, and power (see Figure 1).

We also wanted to ensure that our students could find common themes and ideas across texts and compare how different texts and perspectives represent a similar idea. The Common Core State Standards, and state facsimiles of the standards, require students to write across texts as well. Therefore, our amended prompts could

28). This analysis spoke to our own contexts as critiques of YA literature were often conflated with defense of canonical books. However, we used the concern of AP preparation to our benefit. As a result, the team sought avenues to include novels listed on the AP book list in book clubs as well as YA literature. Additionally, we provided options for students to engage with AP-based prompts using YA literature texts. In using AP prompts as our aegis against the criticism that YA literature isn’t “rigorous,” we were working “within the system to meet the mandate, but doing so on our own terms” (Garcia & O’Donnell-Allen, 2015, p. 9). We have a multitude of critiques of AP as an institution. However, we also knew that AP held capital within our school, so we used that capital to advance our call for YA literature curriculum.

Previous AP

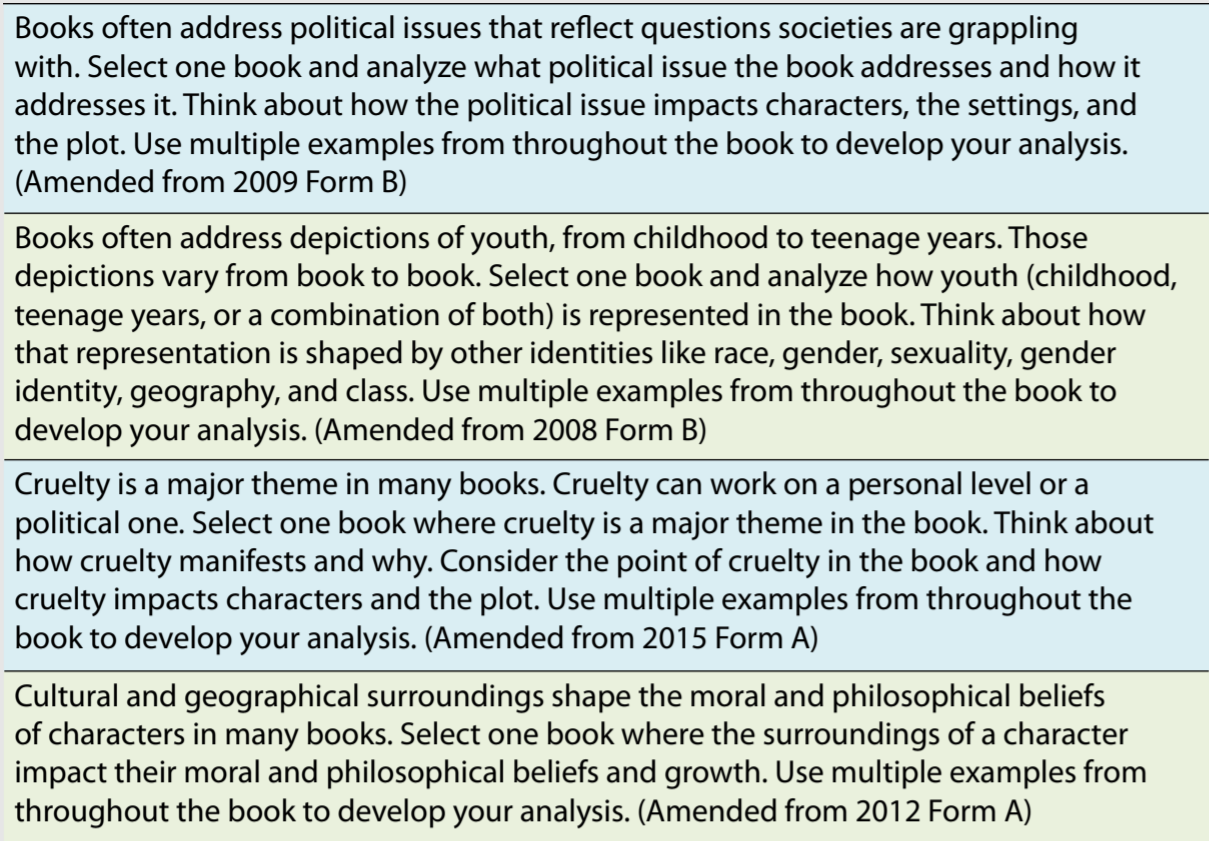


FIGURE 1. AMENDED ESSAY PROMPTS

(RE)DEFINING RIGOR

**A New Definition of Rigor, *Edutopia*
How to Combine Rigor with
Engagement, *Educational
Leadership***

ask students to write about an idea across multiple books. We often expanded “book” to “books” in the prompts during the end of semester writing assignments.

We used student essays and work samples to justify the “**rigor**” of YA literature curriculum to the stakeholders who expressed concern.

Critically Reflecting to Address Our Biases and Points of Growth

In discussing curricular violence, Jones (2020) informs us that as teachers we must “do the right thing by our students, even if that means we have to struggle to learn more and seek feedback from students about the impact of our curricular choices,” which includes that we constantly “review and revise our existing lessons to ensure we’re not wreaking havoc on our students’ emotional and intellectual lives” (p. 50). Although teachers are continuously evaluated by administrators, feedback from students is rarely part of performance evaluations unless initiated by the teachers themselves. We believe a key aspect of rethinking curriculum begins with frequent and candid input from students as part of a class culture that values all voices.



We believe a key aspect of rethinking curriculum begins with frequent and candid input from students as part of a class culture that values all voices.

Despite many calls to make curriculum relevant to students’ interests and lives (Berhman, 2006; Martinez, 2017; Morrell, 2008; Vasquez, 2000), the idea of relevance is vague and often elusive because of the teacher’s positionality. Giroux (1987) argues that when designing curriculum, “the issue here is not merely one of relevance but one of power,” emphasizing that the narratives we choose to center ultimately convey much about the stories we view as worth studying (p. 177). Additionally, the way we label or present narratives matters. Introducing a story as “controversial” often presents a covert ideology that certain identities are up for debate. We critically reflected on curriculum choices using resources such as Teaching Tolerance’s Reading Diversity tools (2016). We also viewed students as co-collaborators in the creation of curriculum. Because of the established class culture, students frequently shared graphic novels they were excited about or TV shows they were binge watching. These texts became access points for us as teachers to both share commonalities with students while also critically considering how our identities might position these works or similar narratives in the curriculum.

While unknown cultural content did cause occasional hesitations or tensions, we believe positioning ourselves as learners alongside students was advantageous for continuing to cultivate class culture. Additionally, these moments promoted discussion of movements such as #ownvoices (Duyvis, 2015), which seeks to center stories and characters authored by groups that have been marginalized. Like Jones (2020), we believe that curricular choices are never neutral and thus must be considered constantly as possible sites of violence. As literacy practices in the classroom and out of school continue to blur, constant reflection and authentic feedback is necessary for teachers considering curricular and pedagogical choices as spaces to reposition power and thus dismantle textual hierarchies.

Creating Policies to Address Potential Pushback

Key elements of our work as a group of ELA teachers included collaboration. Our collaboration, like most teachers’, was a deep and thoughtful approach to considering how we implement different topics across grade bands and courses. As ninth and tenth grade teachers, we had an opportunity to craft a unique experience for students ensuring that students build on their previous learning and continue to grow and expand their competencies and understandings. A key strength of this collaboration was creating a united front and systematic approach to content and ideas.

An important result of our collaboration included crafting a department-wide policy that addressed and shared the multitude of novels students would read throughout the year. Many of the YA literature titles used in our curriculum address topics such as sexuality, drugs, abuse, and various representations of teenage rebellion. It is unsurprising that some caregivers voiced their contention with our choices to administration. By outlining our beliefs and reasoning for the selection of each text, we not only informed parents of the texts we would be reading, but also made a statement about diversity and inclusion within our classrooms. Once endorsed by administration, our policy became the “go-to” document when caregivers raised concern about “what’s happening in English class.”

A second important result of our work together was fulfilling our desire to include administration and the curriculum coordinator in our work. We discussed what was going on in our courses during English Department meetings. We also shared our curriculum, parent newsletters, and text choices with administration and the curriculum coordinator. This allowed them to be involved in our thinking about what was going on in our courses, and more specifically, how our content and approaches enriched our students’ learning. This involvement was helpful when caregivers wanted to meet to discuss curricular and text choices. As a result, many individuals at the table had a solid understanding of how the courses build upon one another and why we were making certain instructional decisions.

Conclusion

YA literature has potential to be transformative in high school English classrooms. Yet, concerns and barriers from multiple sources exist and cannot be ignored. We were able to make YA literature a crucial part of our curriculum in our own experiences as high school English teachers. As a result of this work, our students were able to engage in meaningful class readings that permitted them to read stories that are oftentimes not included in curriculum. Additionally, we were able to ask students what types of books they wanted to read and create multiple opportunities for co-constructed curricula. We continue to hear from former students about how important these choices were for their ELA learning and literacy growth. Yet, we were also able to work within the system that favors AP-focused choices to ensure that students were gaining the skills and practice needed to begin preparing for success in the AP classroom. It is our belief that teachers should work together across grade



It is our belief that teachers should work together across grade levels to ensure students have access to texts . . . that honor their experiences and interests.

levels to ensure students have access to texts and experiences that give them the power to read and engage with novels that honor their experiences and interests.

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WRITE FOR US!

English Leadership Quarterly currently has two open **Calls for Manuscripts for the 2020 August and October issues**. The **April** and **August** editions comprise a two-part issue concentrating on equity in the language arts classroom: The **April** issue focuses on **curriculum** that reaches and represents all learners; in **August**, the emphasis will move to pedagogy that supports equitable practice in the classroom. Finally, the **October** issue looks at the pertinent matter of leading in a time of crisis. Check out the full [calls for manuscripts](#) and join the conversation!

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